

Forms and Sensibles: Phaedo 74B-C

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In *Phaedo* 74b6-c6 Plato offers an important argument for the proposition that such things as "the equal itself," i.e. such things as are often called "Forms," are distinct from sensible objects. The argument is especially important because it is one of a very small number of explicit arguments—perhaps only two—that Plato gives for this proposition.¹

I wish to isolate this argument to concentrate on what I take to be its philosophically most interesting features as an argument for the existence of Forms distinct from sensibles. I am not here concerned with its other interesting features, such as its role in Plato's argument for the kind of *a priori* knowledge that he calls "recollection."

I am especially interested in what must be presupposed if the argument is to be thought cogent (though I certainly do not believe that it is in fact cogent), and what is likely to have been presupposed by Plato. I am also concerned to show just how narrow a basis Plato wishes to use for the argument. In particular, I would like to make it clear how little of his view about Forms is presupposed in the argument, and how little of that view one can infer simply from interpreting the argument itself, as contrasted with the surrounding context.

1. In 74a9-12, Plato writes as follows (translations are my own):

We say that there is some equal,—I don't mean a log to a log or a stone to a stone or anything else of that sort—but something else different from all those, the equal itself. Shall we say it is something or nothing?

Plato's interlocutor, Simmias, agrees emphatically and without argument. His agreement is not surprising, in view of the fact that earlier at 65d4-e5

it has been said, with just as little controversy, "We say that there is something, [the] just itself," as well as "[the] beautiful [itself], [the] good [itself], size, health, strength, and the being of all of the others, what each is," and it has also been said that people have "not seen any such things with [their] eyes."

On the basis of these passages it is often thought that Plato is taking his theory of Forms for granted.² Some scholars used to infer even that a belief in Forms was held by the historical Socrates and indeed went back to the Pythagoreans, but that view is rarely enough held nowadays that I propose to pass over it. Others wonder whether Plato can perhaps have thought that the existence of Forms needed no argument at all to the ordinary person or the ordinary philosopher, though other Platonic passages, such as *Republic* 476-480 and *Sophist* 246a-b show that that is not the case. Another possibility is that he knew that the matter was controversial, but simply never had a cogent argument to give, perhaps believing either (though it is not at all clear that he would ever endorse such a form of inference) that belief in the existence of Forms could be justified indirectly, by some overall fruitfulness or reasonableness of the conclusions issuing from it,³ or (something that he sometimes seems to suggest) that people to whom the existence of Forms is not obvious are too obtuse to be worth bothering with.

It is important, however, to be clearly aware of just what he is taking for granted, and what he is prepared to try to justify. He does take for granted that *there is such a thing as* "the equal itself," "the beautiful itself," and so on. He does not, however, take for granted that such things are *distinct from sensible, physical objects*, although he does state this claim before he actually argues for it. He states it in 65d-e, where it is agreed that one has "never seen with one's eyes" or "touched with any other of the bodily senses" any such things as "the beautiful itself" (65d9-12). It is also stated in 74a9-12 that "we say" that there is some equal that is not "a log to a log or a stone to a stone or anything else of that sort, but something else different from all those." But in 74b6-c6 Plato explicitly addresses the possibility that someone may not agree that Forms are distinct from sensible objects, and provides an argument to try to meet this view. "Or do they not appear different to you?" he says, and proceeds to argue that they are.

But before we take up this argument, let us ask what, after all, the claim Plato *has* taken for granted amounts to, if not that Forms are distinct from sensibles. Clearly, that there is such a thing as "the equal," "the

beautiful,” and so on. However, this can easily seem in itself to be a relatively uncontroversial claim, when divorced from the further claim that these things are distinct from sensibles. “Is there such a thing as equality?” Plato probably expected interlocutors to respond affirmatively without hesitation, so long as the response was deemed compatible with denying that there exist any objects beside sensible ones, and with saying that equality is in fact a sensible object itself. “Certainly there is such a thing as equality,” he might expect them to say, “but it isn’t something distinct from sensible equal things, and perhaps it isn’t any single thing (cf. *Rep.* 479a4-5, e.g.); rather, it is just different sensible equals, depending on the context of discourse, or else it is somehow all of them taken together.”

To this way of dispensing with Forms and the like there is of course a well-known alternative, exploited by Russell in another connection, of saying that all contexts of discourse containing explicit talk of “equality,” as purporting to refer to an object, ought to be regarded as a misleading manner of speaking, to be paraphrased *en bloc* into discourse not containing any expression seeming to designate such an entity. But although I think Plato could have constructed an argument against this alternative, he does not seem to me at all likely to have had it in mind, or expected his opponents to. For this reason, I think that he in no way intends here to be taking any controversial metaphysical claim for granted. Instead, as he and his opponents view the matter, the really controversial and substantive part of what he has to say here comes when he argues, in 74b6-c6, that the equal is distinct from sensible equal things.

2. That argument is in one way less interesting than it has sometimes been taken to be, but philosophically I think it is more interesting than is usually realized. It is less interesting because it gives us rather less information than we might have hoped to gain from it concerning Plato’s views about Forms, or what I shall speak of, with many others, as his theory of Forms.⁴ The argument rests on a claim that Forms have a certain feature that sensibles do not have, and therefore must be distinct from sensibles. The question is, what exactly is that feature. If it is important for delineating Plato’s theory, then the argument may tell us something interesting about it.

Unfortunately, what the property is lies obscured in some exegetical problems, which we shall have to examine briefly. The passage, 74b6-c6, runs as follows:

. . . Or doesn't it [the equal itself] appear (φαίνεται) to you different [sc., from sensible sticks and stones]? Consider thus. Don't equal (ἴσοι) sticks and stones sometimes, being the same (ταὐτὰ ὄντα), appear (φαίνεται) to one person equal and not to another?

Certainly.

Well, then, have the equals themselves (αὐτὰ τὰ ἴσα) ever appeared (ἐφάνη) to you unequal (ἄνισα), or equality (ἰσότης) inequality (ἀνισότης)?

Never yet, Socrates.

So these equals (ταὐτα τὰ ἴσα) and the equal itself (αὐτὸ τὸ ἴσον) are not the same.

They don't appear (φαίνεται) so to me at all.

On this translation of the passage, Plato seems to think that there is a difference between Forms and sensibles with regard to how it is possible for them to appear to us, and so we shall have to see what that difference is.

3. But the translation is controversial in one way that would conflict with this understanding of the argument.⁵ For under a suggestion made by N. R. Murphy and developed by G. E. L. Owen, the passage should be taken to mean that "equal sticks and stones sometimes, being the same, appear equal to one thing and not to another."⁶

Although there is something to be said for this interpretation,⁷ it seems to me now that it cannot be sustained as a reading of the present passage. Three points against it are noted by David Gallop.⁸ One is that since any equal thing is inevitably equal to some things and not to others, it would seem very strange to say only that this happens "sometimes" (b8). Second, the interpretation makes Plato hold that the equal itself somehow is free from this feature of sensible equals, which appears to make little sense, since it involves supposing that the equal itself is somehow equal but not equal *to* anything.⁹ Third, it is awkward, verbally at least, to apply the argument framed in terms of "equal", to the other terms ("beautiful", etc.) that Plato gives in 75c-d (as well as, one should add, 65d-e).

A fourth objection to the Murphy/Owen interpretation is that it makes little sense of Plato's repeated use of the word "appears" (φαίνεσθαι). If Plato's point were that equal sensible objects *are* equal to one thing but not to another, then he might be expected to have said just that.¹⁰ It might be replied that φαίνεσθαι need not mean "appears" but can also mean

“is evidently or apparently”. But this reading of the word fits awkwardly onto the present passage. The only contrast that is natural to see in 74b8, in the phrase “*being* (ὄντα) the same,” is a contrast between how things are and how they appear, not one between how things are and how they evidently are. Moreover, when the conclusion is reached in c4-5, an emphatic “is” (ἐστίν) is used (which contrasts naturally with φαίνεται in b7, which deals with how things seemed before the argument was given).¹¹

Of the objections that Gallop lists, the third seems relatively weak,¹² but the other two are weighty, as is the fourth objection just expounded. The first strengthens the observation just made about what the natural contrast is to see in the passage. The second would require an essay in itself to deal with, but seems to me extremely strong. Although Plato has been accused by philosophers since Russell of being confused about relations and relational predicates, it seems to me to require far more than such a philosophical confusion to explain how Plato could have thought, straightforwardly and consciously, that anything, sensible or not, could be equal but not equal to anything, or equal to some one thing but not unequal to other things that are themselves equal to that first thing.¹³ Moreover there is strong evidence, from such passages as *Symp.* 199dsqq., that Plato did indeed understand that relational predicates in general, or at least binary relational predicates, do not hold just of isolated single objects without regard to others, as nonrelational predicates do.¹⁴ At any rate, the present case, “equal” does not seem to me to be one about which he could have been so ludicrously confused.¹⁵

4. So let us take our translation as provisionally given and try to understand its implications.

Remember that even though Plato is talking to people who, as we saw from 65d-e and 74a, are willing to accept the view that the equal itself is distinct from all sensible objects, he is in 74b6-c6 temporarily arguing against doubts about that thesis. For that reason, we may expect that his argument will use premises that will be plausible to those not accepting the thesis or special theses associated with it.

Let us look at those premises. I shall first expound them briefly, under what I take to be the natural and correct interpretation, and explain how they are supposed to yield the conclusion that Plato wishes. Then I shall take up a number of difficulties that have led commentators to interpret them otherwise.

Premise (A): Don't equal sticks and stones sometimes, being the same, appear to one person equal and not to another? What phenomenon is Plato alluding to here? The initially most natural interpretation, which is also supported by reasons that I shall be laying out, is that he is alluding, as W. D. Ross and R. Hackforth suggested,¹⁶ to the familiar fact that any pair of visible objects, which are in fact equal, can appear equal to a person looking at them from one perspective, but appear unequal to a person simultaneously looking at them from another perspective. ("Sometimes," because of course at other times a pair of equal objects may well seem equal to all observers who are looking at them.) There have been objections to this interpretation, but I shall deal with them in due course.

Premise (B): Well, then, have the equals themselves (αὐτὰ τὰ ἴσα) ever appeared (ἐφάνη) to you unequal (ἄνισα), or equality (ἰσότης) inequality (ἀνισότης)?—Never yet, Socrates. What is being alluded to here is something much more complicated and problematical, though at first sight it may well seem to be the straightforward fact that Plato presents it as being. If one considers the question that one might formulate by asking whether equality could ever appear to one to be inequality, it seems very easy to reply that it obviously could not. For it seems hard to imagine, in any straightforward way, a circumstance in which one could say that equality appears to be inequality, or in which one thinks that equality is inequality.¹⁷

These two premises together are designed to demonstrate that the equal itself must be distinct from any sensible equal object or objects by showing that a certain feature possessed by the former is not possessed by the latter.¹⁸ This feature is, to speak loosely, a kind of incapacity to be the subject of a certain sort of error or perhaps misapprehension. The crucial question is, exactly what is this resistance to error? As commentators have observed, this question is quite difficult.¹⁹

The main difficulty with the argument, as construed in this way, is that of finding one and the same sort of resistance to error that can reasonably be attributed to Forms but withheld from sensibles. It seems somewhat plausible to say that *equality* never appears to be *inequality*, but it seems doubtful that any equal objects ever appear to be *inequality* either. Similarly, it seems plausible, as we saw, to say that sensible equals sometimes appear unequal, but it sounds very strange to say that equality never appears unequal, since that makes it sound as though equality is some sort of object with dimensions that can be measured against others by the mind's eye. Equally, as David Bostock points out, it does not seem possible for Plato

to argue that whereas equality can never appear to be its contrary, sensible equals can appear to be "their contrary," since two different senses of "contrary" would be involved here, one for a property (or the like) that is contrary to another property, and another for a thing possessing the contrary property to that possessed by another thing.²⁰ So what is it that, according to Plato, is true of the equal but not of sensible equals?

It seems to me that this problem is solved once one correctly interprets the way Plato understands the supposition being argued against, that the equal itself might be sensible. Sensible equals, we agree, are capable of appearing unequal to people looking at them. Now if it is to be supposed that the equal itself might be a sensible equal thing or pair of sensible equal things, clearly it would have to be supposed *also* that the unequal, or alternatively inequality, was also a sensible object. For plainly the idea that motivates the supposition about the equal is that there are no objects other than sensibles, and there is no question that here—whatever may be the case elsewhere in Plato's works—Plato claims existence as much for the unequal as for the equal.²¹ So if the equal were sensible, and if accordingly the unequal were also sensible, then since any sensible equal is capable of appearing unequal, it would turn out that the equal was capable of appearing, in respect of equality or inequality, just like the unequal and in the relevant way indistinguishable from it.²² So the feature that equality possesses and that it would not possess if it were sensible is that of being incapable of appearing, from any point of view, indistinguishable from inequality.

To this perspectivalist line of interpretation Alexander Nehamas has raised an objection, that it does not allow the generalization of Plato's argument from "equal" to other predicates.²³ According to Nehamas, although Plato might conceivably hold that a given *type* of action, for example, would always have both just and unjust instances (see, e.g., *Rep.* 331c-d), he would never say that numerically one and the same *particular* action either (a) *is* both just and unjust or, given the circumstances in which it actually occurs, even (b) *appears* both just and unjust from different perspectives. As to (a), Nehamas is of course quite right, though it is not relevant to the present issue. But not about (b), which is. Plato agrees here that the sticks *are* equal (see ἴσοι, "equal," in b8, and n. 10). What he claims, on the perspectivalist interpretation, is that they appear unequal from different perspectives. Nehamas disputes this for other cases, such as "just". But it seems to me that on examination the case fails to hold up. The perspectives that Nehamas thinks are lacking in such

cases are provided precisely by the sources of that very disagreement among people—their own interests and mistaken or confused views about what justice is—that Plato thinks is rampant. From the viewpoint of the madman in *Republic* 331c-d, who knows that he has been promised a weapon and who believes that it is just to return what one owes, it will *appear* just for the weapon to be returned, even though in what Plato takes to be the correct view it *is* not just. He never suggests that viewpoints are lacking from which such correct judgments will appear false, or from which incorrect judgments will appear true. What makes it possible for us sometimes to adjudicate such cases correctly, he holds, is the use of calculation and measurement (cf. *Euthyphro* 7b-d), and also a knowledge of the Forms (e.g., *Rep.* 540a-b). But as the very example in the present argument shows, even when measurement shows that two things are equal it is possible for them to appear otherwise. So the perspectivist interpretation seems to me to generalize quite as well as Plato could hope.

5. But even if this interpretation is conceded to be initially plausible, it faces some severe difficulties concerning Premise (B) that need to be confronted.

The first matter that needs to be disposed of concerns 74c1-2, where Plato asks, “Well, then, have the equals themselves (αὐτὰ τὰ ἴσα) ever appeared (ἐφάνη) to you unequal (ἄνισα), or equality (ἰσότης) inequality (ἀνισότης)?” And why does he use both the plural expression, “the equals themselves”, and the singular, “the equal itself”? Do these expressions refer to different things or is Plato pleonastically raising one issue about one thing? Now in spite of some dissenting opinions, it seems to me impossible to make his argument hang together if we take him to be making distinct claims about distinct entities, since obviously c4-5 announces only one conclusion about one thing, “the equal itself.”²⁴ Given that, we are obliged to say that in c1-4 he is using all three expressions, “the equals themselves”, “equality”, and “the equal itself”, as different designations of the same item.

Let us first ask, then, why Plato uses the plural form, “the equals themselves”, instead of the more common singular expression, “the equal itself”, at c1-2? Here it seems to me that Owen had a reasonable initial answer: the plural form is a grammatically natural way of following up on the plural forms in the preceding lines (b7-9).²⁵ This answer is sufficient to dispose of any grammatical oddity in the shift of terminology. But it

leaves unanswered the further question whether there is any significance for Plato in the distinction between the singular, "the equal itself", and the plural, "the equals themselves", as designations of the Form, and, if so, what that significance is. Here it seems to me that the right response, insofar as our argument is concerned, is that there plainly is no significance at all, and that is why Plato moves so casually between the two expressions. Further issues within the theory of Forms might indeed require Plato to determine which expression, if either, is the more apt, and we are free to search other texts for more evidence on the question. But the present argument requires no such determination, and it seems to me a mistake to read one in.

The next question receives an answer similar to the previous one. If we assume that there is no significant difference between the designations "the equal itself" and "the equals themselves", we must then ask whether there is any significant difference between the phrases "the equal itself" and "equality" in Plato's formulation of Premise (B). (As Gallop points out,²⁶ both are of the sort that Plato frequently uses as variant designations of Forms.) Once again, it seems to me that there cannot be, because Plato clearly presents the argument as yielding a single conclusion concerning a single sort of object (c4-5 with b2, 4-6).

But what is the explanation of Plato's having used these two expressions? For they carry quite different suggestions. Notoriously, the phrase "the equal itself" suggests what Gregory Vlastos once called "self-predication," the idea that the Form of equal is itself equal, i.e., some sort of equal thing (or, perhaps, equal things), whereas the term "equality" seems to convey no such idea. Must we not understand the argument in one of these ways or the other?

Once again, the reasonable thing to say is that Plato does not settle this issue here, and casually allows both designations of the Form of equal, precisely because his argument here does not require that the issue be settled. The crucial thing for his argument is that the Form never appears to be its contrary, which it would do if it were a sensible object, as explained above at the end of sec. 4. Plato allows us to put this point in two different ways. One, which seems perhaps the less problematical, is to say that equality never appears to be inequality. The other is to say that the equal never appears to be unequal, which is to say that the Form never appears to have the distinguishing characteristic of its contrary (cf. n. 22). I see little doubt that Plato was in a position to ask himself which formulation was theoretically the more apt, and that he neatly sidestepped the question

here because it seemed to him to have no bearing on this argument for the distinctness of Forms from sensibles.²⁷

For this reason there seems no justification for reading the argument as if it requires for its cogency a "self-predicationist" picture of the Forms. Some commentators assume that it must, probably because they read it in the light of the ensuing passage, 74c7-75a4, in which Plato says that sensibles "fall short of" being just like Forms (74d5-7 with e1-2, 75a1-2, b1-2, 7-8). I myself think that it is very unclear whether that passage forces a self-predicationist account of the Forms,²⁸ but even if it does, that by no means entails that the present argument requires a premise either entailing or presupposing self-predication.

6. But even if we keep the argument unencumbered by special metaphysical assumptions, we still must ask what it means to say that equality never appears to be inequality.

A first possibility is this. By analogy to the case of the equal things that can appear unequal from some viewpoints, one might think of the equal itself as something that one is somehow "aware" of or with which one is "acquainted." And one might hold that one can never be aware of it in such a way as to make one believe that it is, while it is so presenting itself, inequality.

On a second view, one might take it that what is being said is solely that a certain proposition, that equality is inequality, is one that we are not capable of believing, or differently that a certain sentence, "Equality is inequality", is not one that we are capable of sincerely asserting. On this view, the notion of a relation between the object, equality, and the person or mind in question, would be eliminated.

Now it is clear, on the one hand, that there is no justification in the passage for saying that Plato's argument itself requires any substantial notion of awareness of equality by the mind. True, Plato often talks elsewhere in such a way as to suggest such a notion,²⁹ but even if he might accept it in the *Phaedo* too, he does not indicate at all that the argument in 74b6-c6 must make use of it. And although Premise (A) deals with the way in which one can be aware, through sensation, of equal physical objects, that by no means implies that Premise (B) does something analogous for the equal itself.

On the other hand, the second view as stated obviously will not serve the purposes of the argument in 74b6-c6. As we have seen, that argument

must proceed by citing a feature of the object, equality, which is shown not to attach to equal sensibles. So no property of a sentence or proposition will serve Plato's purposes *unless* it somehow implicates a feature of equality itself.

Now there is a way of introducing a feature of equality into this discussion of appearances without at the same time injecting a notion of awareness. This can be done through something like the notion of what has been called "belief *de re*."³⁰ The sentence, "Plato believes that the equal is a Form", need not be taken simply as saying that Plato stands in a certain relation to a particular proposition without involving a relation to the object, the equal. It can also be taken as ascribing to the equal a certain relation to Plato, namely, that of being believed by Plato to be a Form. In the same way, one can ascribe or deny to the equal another feature, that of being believed by Simmias to be the unequal. Now Plato does not here use the word "believe" but uses instead the word "appear". But it seems entirely possible that he has in mind, under the expression "(does not) appear to be the unequal", a feature that might be expressed equally by the phrase, "is (not) believed to be the unequal". If that is so, then he would be saying that the equal does not have the feature of being believed by anyone to be the unequal.

The difficulty with this proposal, however, is that it seems to make Premise (B) turn out to be obviously false. For even if it is true that no one would ever hold a belief that he represented to himself by the sentence, "The equal is the unequal", it is well known that there are other propositions, that arguably produce the same effect. For the equal can be referred to in other ways than by "the equal", e.g., "the Form referred to at *Phaedo* 74c5", and there seems no impossibility in someone's believing something expressed by the (false) proposition, "The Form referred to at *Phaedo* 74c5 is the unequal". But Plato's premise will be falsified if this fact licenses us to infer that the equal has the feature, being believed to be the unequal.³¹ If (B) is to be plausible, examples of this sort have to be ruled out as expressing features of the equal. The question is whether Plato would have had any way of doing this.

Obviously what the argument needs is a denial that any and all ways of designating an object can generate beliefs implicating a feature of the object of the relevant sort, which as we have seen are features having to do with how things "appear" (φαίνεσθαι). For example, Plato must be able to deny that when someone believes falsely that—in these words—"the Form referred to at *Phaedo* 74c5 is inequality," that shows that equality has

“appeared” to him to be inequality. To put the matter in a loose and slightly cumbersome way, Plato must be able to hold the thesis,

- (D) Not all designations of an object (or other ways of thinking about an object³²) that can be used to refer to that object in the formulation of a belief concerning it generate “appearances” of the object.

If this thesis can be sustained, then it may perhaps turn out that Premise (B) can be sustained as well. That is, it may turn out that there are no designations of equality under which anyone could hold an *appearance-belief*, as we may call it, to the effect that equality is inequality.

Plato himself in this passage uses an expression that may convey the necessary idea. The verb (ἐννοεῖν), often translated “to have in mind” or “consider”, occurs a number of times in a way allowing one to say that one has a particular object in mind (74b6, d1, e2, 75a5-6).³³ Perhaps we can say, as a rough approximation, that in Plato’s view, someone’s using the expression “the Form referred to at *Phaedo* 74c5” in a normal way would not *eo ipso* show that he “had equality in mind,” whereas someone’s using the expression “equality” in the normal way would show that he had equality in mind.

I have no idea how this distinction can be generally drawn in a clear and philosophically satisfactory way, but I think that from a naive point of view there does *seem* to be a distinction between designations that, properly used or possessed, implicate a person’s having the designatum in mind and those that do not. Typically, people using the word “equality” can reasonably be said to have equality “in mind,” and people using the phrase “the Form referred to at . . .” cannot (though by now the reader of the foregoings probably does). So if Plato is using such a distinction, he is using something that at least has some appeal.

Moreover it seems plain, as I have indicated, that—and this is a point to be emphasized—Plato’s argument *must* presuppose *some* such distinction as this, in order to meet the obvious counterexamples to Premise (B), whether or not the distinction was clearly or explicitly in his mind, and whether or not he had any fixed way of explaining it. As I have already said, the distinction does not require him to hold that one can be “aware” of Forms in any full-blooded sense, though of course he might elsewhere have wished to use that notion (and I think he did). But it does require some notion of “having in mind” that will exclude the sort of counterexamples mentioned.

7. Let us briefly consider what lends Premise (B) the initial plausibility it seems to have.

The vague sense that one has about such abstract entities as equality is that any grasp of them must consist solely or almost solely in a grasp of their "logical" relations to other such objects and their roles in various necessary-seeming "conceptual" facts. That is indeed why such objects have sometimes been held to be nothing but "logical constructions," not genuine entities at all. But if one sticks to a realistic view of the objects and takes this feeling seriously, one gets a picture of objects whose nature consists in, and can be grasped only through a grasp of, certain "logical laws," possibly some "mathematical laws," and various other "conceptual truths." It is seen as part of thinking about equality that one simply cannot somehow take it to be the same as those other objects from which it is distinguished by a crucial difference of "conceptual role."

It is surely this sense that leads to the feeling that there is no way both to have equality in mind and nevertheless to take it to be inequality. If equality is for present purposes understood to be sameness of some spatial dimension, then inequality seems to amount to nothing but lack of sameness of that spatial dimension. Thus, equality and inequality seem to stand to each other as merely the possession and the lack, by things within the same domain, of one and the same feature. A person to whom equality appears to be inequality seems accordingly like a person who is not capable of realizing that the having of a certain feature and the lacking of it are distinct. And such a person might well seem to be someone who is incapable of having equality, or inequality, in mind.

In the *Theaetetus*, as is well known, Plato tries to fend off some argumentation for a much stronger thesis, that it is impossible to have in mind any object of the sort "that one can only think about" and nevertheless believe that it is *any* other such object (see 188a-d and 189c-200c, and esp. 195e-196a).³⁴ That thesis is stronger than our Premise (B) in at least two ways. For one thing, it deals not merely with the relation between a property and its contrary, but with a relation between an object that can be thought about and *all* other such objects. Secondly, it says not merely that an object of the relevant sort cannot "*appear*" to be a different object, but that it is impossible to *believe* that the one object is another. What the considerations are that motivate that thesis, and what Plato thinks he can do to combat it (his attempt in the *Theaetetus* to rebut it is a self-confessed failure), are things that I cannot explore here. My only point is to emphasize that the claim that he makes in the *Phaedo*, though perhaps related to that

thesis, is much weaker. It is also more plausible. As we have seen, some plausibility can be generated for the claim that it is impossible to have equality in mind and nevertheless have it appear to be inequality. It is far more difficult to generate any comparable plausibility for the contention that it is impossible to believe any abstract object, say, to be any other abstract object. Probably the reason is that because the relations among various abstract objects are as complicated as they are—far more complicated than the relation of simple contrariety between equality and inequality—it does not offhand seem impossible to have one abstract object “in mind” and not realize that it is distinct from another abstract object that stands in similar but different complicated relations to various other such objects. But of course much more would have to be said to get to the bottom of this issue.

8. Let us now briefly consider the contrast between sensibles and Forms that emerges from Premise (A) along with the foregoing considerations about Premise (B).

At the end of sec. 4 above, we saw that the feature possessed by equality that it would not possess if it were sensible, according to Plato, is that of being incapable of appearing to be inequality. We have just seen that Plato *must* put some sort of restriction on the notion of equality’s “appearing” thus-and-so if he is to be able to uphold this claim.

It is of course not to be denied that a sensible object can be designated in such a way as to imply that it possesses a certain property and could not consistently actually possess the contrary property. For example, one can designate “that pair of equal sticks over there,” and by that designation one implies that the pair of sticks is not at that time unequal. But the difference between sensibles and Forms to which Plato is pointing is this. It is impossible, he claims, for someone to “have” equality “in mind,” or have an “appearance” of equality, and at the same time take it that equality *is* inequality. On the other hand it is not impossible, he holds, for someone to have equal sensibles in mind and take it that they are unequal, for the reason that equal sensibles are capable, though *being* equal at a particular time (cf. n. 10) of nevertheless *appearing* unequal at that same time. Indeed, equal sensibles are capable of *appearing* unequal *even when* one is aware explicitly that they are equal, because the knowledge of their equality is not capable of wiping away the sensory appearance of their inequality.³⁵ In the particular respect at hand, that is, he holds that

equal sensibles are capable of presenting misleading appearances in a way in which equality and inequality are not. Unlike sensibles, Forms are "cognitively reliable," as Vlastos has put it (though I would disagree with his way of explaining the matter).³⁶

A common modern reaction to Plato's view, of course, is to contend that he has taken for a feature of equality something that is really only a feature of certain sentences, like "Equality is inequality", or of our ways of using such sentences, or of certain beliefs or other such states of the human mind, like the belief that equality is inequality. (This contention is compatible with the claim that there is such an object as equality, and with its denial.) I think—though I cannot defend the claim here—that Plato was led to his view by more than a mere failure to consider the alternatives, and that he had reasons for rejecting them.

A good deal of Plato's metaphysical thinking goes into trying to explain this difference between Forms and sensibles. As I understand his position, he takes the fact that sensibles exist in space and time to be what allows them to present contrary appearances to different perspectives. Forms, on the other hand, do not have a place within any "manifold" that allows different perspectives or anything of the kind. But the defense of this line of interpretation of the rest of Plato's view lies far beyond the scope of the present paper, and his metaphysical explanation is certainly not presented or used in the argument at hand. Rather, that argument leaves the resistance of the Forms to this particular sort of error at the level of a commonsense observation, on which Plato might hope for agreement from the persons at whom the argument is aimed.

NOTES

1. I myself would include with it only the argument at *Rep.* 476-480.
2. J. L. Ackrill and David Gallop hold that the "theory of Forms" is accepted by all parties in the *Phaedo* itself. See Ackrill, "Anamnesis in the *Phaedo*," in Lee *et al.*, eds., *Exegesis and Argument* (Assen, 1973), pp. 177-195, esp. p. 191, and Gallop, *Plato, Phaedo* (Oxford, 1975), p. 97.
3. Gallop, p. 95, perhaps attributes something like this line of thought to Plato. I myself think that Plato did regard the general capacity to help solve certain philosophical difficulties as commending a belief in the Forms, but I do not think that he regarded that as sufficient by itself to establish that belief (it would not exclude alternative ways of solving those difficulties). Instead, I think he believed that a more direct argument was required, such as we find in the present passage.
4. Many have thought that Plato's works are only fragmentary or inconclusive explorations of philosophical ideas, and some have misgivings about calling what he says about Forms a "theory" (see e.g., Julia Annas, *Introduction to Plato's Republic* [Oxford, 1981], p.

- 217). I myself think that it is correct to speak of Plato's dialogues as expounding a "theory" in some reasonably substantive sense of that word, but here I use it in a very broad and loose way carrying very little freight.
5. The text is mildly problematic too, but I think that what Burnet prints is clearly right, and that attempts to make sense of the alternative reading are clearly unsuccessful: see the discussion by Gallop, p. 122, of Verdenius' interpretation of the variant. I think that Gallop is also quite correct that the Greek will not bear the sense assigned it by his interpretation (c) of the usual text.
 6. See N. R. Murphy, *The Interpretation of Plato's Republic* (Oxford, 1951), p. 111, n., and G. E. L. Owen, "A Proof in the *Peri Ideon*," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* (1957), Pt. 1, 103-111, reprinted in R. E. Allen, ed. *Studies in Plato's Metaphysics* (New York, 1965), 293-312, esp. p. 306, n. 2. (This article will be cited here in the latter pagination.) See also K. W. Mills, "Plato's *Phaedo* 74b7-c6," *Phronesis* 2 (1957), 128-148, and 3 (1958) 40-58, and the discussion in David Gallop, pp. 121-125, as well as Alexander Nehamas, "Plato on the Imperfection of the Sensible World," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 12 (1975), 105-117.
 7. And although I must admit that I once accepted it myself, in my *Plato on Knowledge and Reality* (Indianapolis, 1976), pp. 66-67 with n. 16.
 8. Gallop, pp. 122-123.
 9. The strongest considerations in favor of the Murphy/Owen reading are developed by Owen's arguments that Aristotle took Plato to believe such things, and argued against his theory of Forms partly on that score. See Owen, pp. 309-312.
 10. I disagree with Bostock's strategy, pp. 75-77, of trying to support the view that this is what Plato meant by adducing *Rep.* 479a-c. To present my full reason for disagreeing would require a discussion of that passage, for which I do not have space here. However, Plato's use of the word "equal" (*ἴσος*) at 74b8, with its plain implication that the sticks *are* equal, seems to me to make the present interpretation so much more natural than the other that one should accept the present interpretation if it allows—as I think I can show here that it does—clear sense to be made of Plato's argument.
 11. Nehamas maintains (p. 111, n. 30), adducing *Rep.* 597-598 in support, that because Plato is drawing an ontological distinction, differences in appearance from different perspectives are unlikely to enter into the drawing of it. That seems to me a mistake. For Plato, one manifestation of the ontological distinction is precisely a difference between Forms and sensibles with regard to what appearances they are capable of presenting. See sec. 8.
 12. Indeed, Nehamas (pp. 115-116) bases his defense of the Murphy/Owen interpretation (or something extremely like it) on the claim that it helps us understand Plato's willingness to generalize the argument of 74b-c to other Forms. See sec. 4, end.
 13. As Owen observes, pp. 309-312, Aristotle accuses Plato of introducing a "nonrelative class of relatives," in the sense of somehow nonrelational cases of relational predicates. Although I cannot here adequately expound the issue, I think that Aristotle's remarks do not involve the relations that Owen thinks they do.
 14. A partial list of passages in which Plato deals with relations is given—alas, to little effect—at my *op. cit.*, p. 79 (n. 16). See also E. Scheibe, "Ueber Relativbegriffe in der Philosophie Platons," *Phronesis*, 12 (1967), 28-49, and H.-N. Castaneda, "Plato's *Phaedo* Theory of Relations," *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 1 (1972), 467-480. Though Castaneda's interpretation has raised controversy, he shows at the very least that later passages of the *Phaedo* can be interpreted in such a way as to explain why Plato sometimes talks as though relational predicates are monadic, without attributing to him the view that a relation can hold of a single object without regard to any others.

15. This objection seems to me crippling to the account of Plato's theory of Forms that is advanced by Alexander Nehamas, *op. cit.*, which is a version of the account developed by Owen (in line with the Murphy/Owen interpretation of this passage) and also, in a slightly different version, adopted by Gregory Vlastos, "Degrees of Reality in Plato," Renford Bambrough, ed., *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle* (New York, 1965), pp. 1-19. For Nehamas' account seems clearly to require that the Form of equal possess the property of equality "completely" and "in itself" (p. 116), by which Nehamas evidently means "nonrelationally." With this idea Nehamas seems to combine another one, that the Forms possess their properties *essentially, not accidentally* (*ibid.*). (For this idea see also Vlastos, *op. cit.*, p. 17, "All of [a Form's] properties must stick to it with logical glue.") Nehamas seems to be relying tacitly on the idea that there is some sort of connection between possessing a property essentially and possessing it nonrelationally. Perhaps he takes this connection to lie in the often-alleged impossibility of a thing's bearing an essential relation to some other thing (which is the denial of the traditional so-called Doctrine of Internal Relations). Unfortunately, he does not explain what he has in mind. In general, it seems plain that unless the connection is shown, essentiality is one thing and nonrelationality is quite another. It might be plausible to say that Plato took the Form of equal to be equal essentially, but this plausibility cannot be transferred to the idea that he took the Form of equal to be equal nonrelationally, as Nehamas' line of thought here seems to require.

Independent of Nehamas' positive account there are also objections that he raises to the sort of account offered here. To those objections I turn in sec. 4.

16. See W. D. Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas* (Oxford, 1951), p. 23, and R. Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedo*, (Cambridge, England, 1955), p. 69.
17. To such interpretations as this Nehamas objects (p. 111) that it requires the equal to be "an impossible-object construction," something that appears equal from all angles. Not so (to pass over the fact—cf. n. 15—that an equal not equal to anything is quite as impossible). Plato's point is not that unlike sensibles, the equal appears equal from *all* angles. Rather it is that unlike sensibles, the equal does *not* appear *unequal* from *any* angles, because it doesn't, so to speak, *have* any angles. See further sec. 8.
- Nehamas seems to me clearly right, however, in rejecting the "approximation interpretation" of this passage, according to which only the Form of equal is exactly equal whereas sensible equals are only approximately equal. The approximation interpretation was also rejected by Owen, "A Proof," and Gregory Vlastos, "Degrees." See more recently Bostock, p. 73-74.
18. See Mills, p. 128; Gallop, p. 124-125; and Bostock, p. 83.
19. See for example Mills, p. 128; Gallop, p. 121; Mohan Matthen, "Forms and Participants in Plato's Phaedo," *Nous*, 18 (1984), 281-297; and Bostock, pp. 83-85.
20. Bostock, p. 84.
21. I think myself that Plato usually allows "contrary Forms," in spite of the fact that they seem to raise difficulties for his theory, as Gallop points out (p. 125). See Vlastos, "Degrees of Reality in Plato," pp. 7-8.
22. The person claiming that equality and inequality are both sensible will presumably claim that they are different sensible objects, but it is hard to imagine what the difference between them will then be said to be. That one is on Fourth Avenue and the other on Fifth Avenue? I think, in fact (though I cannot pursue the matter here), that Plato has in mind an opponent who believes that neither equality nor inequality is "a single thing," but that each, so to speak, is "many," i.e., equality is the many equal sensibles and inequality is the many unequal sensibles (see e.g., *Rep.* 479a4-5). The idea is probably that, for example, equality can be taken, depending on the circumstances, as any given

- sensible instance of equality you like (comparison of this view with, say, Berkeley's is suggestive).
23. Nehamas, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-116.
 24. Matthen, *op. cit.*, advances an interpretation that, like Bluck's earlier account (R. S. Bluck, "Plato's Form of Equal," *Phronesis*, 4 [1959], 5-11), finds in the argument not only Forms and sensibles but additional entities as well. Aside from points of detail (which I attempt to cover below), I think that both Matthen's interpretations and Bluck's introduce far more complexity into the argument than the text justifies (for example, Matthen, p. 291, requires the introduction of a complicated, non-trivial "unspoken lemma"). Plato presents his argument as a simple, brief, and straightforward one, not involving complicated background assumptions. It seems to me that that is how we ought to take it if we possibly can. (This does not, however, settle whether Plato *elsewhere*, as in *Phaedo* 102ff., introduces such entities as "Form copies" into his metaphysics.)
 25. See G. E. L. Owen, "Dialectic and Eristic in the Treatment of the Forms," in G. E. L. Owen, ed., *Aristotle on Dialectic* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 103-125, esp. p. 114-115.
 26. Gallop, pp. 123-124.
 27. It is not clear that the same can be said of the argument for the same conclusion at *Rep.* 476-480.
 28. Many interpreters have denied that that passage, and in general those passages that hold that sensibles are copies of Forms, support a strictly self-predicationist interpretation. See for example R. E. Allen, "Participation and Predication," Allen, ed., *op. cit.* pp. 43-60, esp. pp. 45-47. Gallop's view on the present passage (pp. 92-93, 125) is that Plato had not yet distinguished the descriptive and designative roles of such phrases as "the equal". Perhaps not (as I once agreed, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-65, 78 [n. 7], 86 [n. 54]). But *Meno* 73e-74b suggests otherwise (cf. *Rep.* 509a3). At any rate, my point here is that the present argument does not require for its cogency any implicit self-predicationist assumption, and our interpretation of the force of the argument itself should not incorporate one.
 29. See e.g., *Phdo.* 109d-e, 11c; *Rep.* 515-516, 532b-c.
 30. The recent discussion of this sort of matter goes back to Quine's paper, "Quantifiers and Propositional Attitudes," *Journal of Philosophy*, 53 (1956).
 31. See, for example, Matthen, p. 285.
 32. I add "ways of thinking about an object" to allow for the possibility that an object may be introduced into a belief by some means other than a strictly linguistic designation. Though important in other connections, this qualification is unimportant here.
 33. Note that there is a distinction at work after our argument between ἐννοεῖν and ἐπιστάσθαι, which is relevant to Plato's views about recollection.
 34. I take this to be the import of 195e-196a, esp. 195e1-3, 196a2, though the matter is complex.
 35. See, e.g., *Rep.* 602e and *Soph.* 235e-236a.
 36. "Degrees of Reality," p. 7. The reason why I would disagree with his way of explaining the matter is that he accepts something rather closer to the Murphy/Owen account of Plato's attitude to predicates like "equal" than I would (cf. sec. 3).